Syntactic Structure of Argument Wh-questions in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL)

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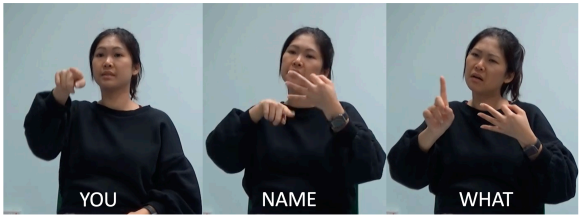
Introduction

Goal: This study investigates the syntactic structure of argument wh-questions in Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL) using the Generative framework.



'What is your name?'

Hong Kong Sign Language (HKSL):

- Used by Deaf communities in Hong Kong SAR.
- Canonical word order: SVO (Sze, 2000).

Observations (1)

- All argument wh-phrases appear in the clause-final position.[1]
- Subject **WHO** can appear clause-initially (3 b), but NOT other subject wh-phrases (2).

(1) a. AARON LIKE **WHO/WHAT**?
'Who/what does Aaron like?' (object wh-question)

b. ***WHO/WHAT** AARON LIKE?

(2) a. MAKE N-9-5 MASK **COMPANY WHAT**?
'What company makes N95 masks?' (subject wh-question)

b. ***COMPANY WHAT** MAKE N-9-5 MASKS?

(3) a. EAT BANANA **WHO**?
'Who eats bananas?' (subject wh-question)

b. **WHO** EAT BANANA?

[1] Wh-phrases appearing at the clause-final position are rare in spoken languages but not for sign languages (Zeshan, 2006; Zeshan, 2004).

Observations (2)

- Multiple wh-questions is generally banned, but D(iscourse)-linking[2] can improve the acceptability.

(4) a. ***WHO** BUY **WHAT**? (non-D-linked)
'Who buy what?'

b. ?**STUDENT WHO** BUY **COMPUTER BUOY-WHICH**? (D-linked)
'Who of the students bought which computer?'

[2] Cross-linguistically, *Which*-phrases are typically D-linked in that they prompt an answer chosen from referents that are already available in the discourse. *Who* and *what* are typically non-D-linked, unless the set of possible answers has been mentioned in the previous discourse and is known to the interlocutors (Pesetsky, 1987; Kuroda, 1968; Katz and Postal, 1964).

Interactions between multiple wh-questions & D-linking (1)

A few languages disallow multiple wh-questions in general, including Italian, Irish, Berber, Somali (Calabrese, 1987; Adams, 1985; Stoyanova, 2004; Stoyanova, 2008), and Mandinka (Gan, 2020).

(5) a. **Chi ha scritto che cosa*
who has written what
'Who has written what?'

[Italian]

b. **Musa je mune dii jumaa la*
Musa PERF what give who PART
'Musa gave what to whom?'

[Mandinka]

Whether D-linking matters has not been discussed.

Interactions between multiple wh-questions & D-linking (2)

D-linking improves multiple wh-questions in HKSL and Mandinka, but not Italian.

(6) a. **Quale studente comrepà quale libro*
which student will-buy which book
'Which student will buy which book?'
[Italian]

b. *?Musa je meŋ kitaaboo dii miŋ suŋkutoo la*
Musa PERF which book give which girl PART
'Musa gave which book to which girl?'
[Mandinka]

(7) **STUDENT WHO** BUY **COMPUTER BUOY-WHICH**?
'Who of the students bought which computer?' [HKSL]

Research questions

- RQ1: What is the syntactic position(s) of argument wh-phrases in HKSL?
- RQ2: How come the acceptability of multiple questions improves in D-linked context in HKSL (but not in Italian)?

Methodology

The observations are based on both elicited naturalistic data & acceptability judgment data collected in my fieldwork (2019 - 2022).

- **Elicited naturalistic data**: 5 native deaf signers (3F 3M, 40s)[3]
- **Acceptability judgment data**: 3 native deaf signers (1F 2M, 40s)
- '*native*' defined as being born to deaf signing parents and have been exposed/using HKSL as the primary language of communication since birth.

[3] 'F(emale)/M(ale)' in terms of natal sex.

The data:
Argument wh-questions in HKSL

I will show that...

Part 1. In single wh-questions, wh-phrase undergoes overt rightward wh-movement.

- Rightward movement is attested;
- Rightward movement is not focus driven.

Part 2. Subject WHO is special. It can be interpreted in situ.
Part 3. In multiple wh-questions, one wh-phrase undergoes overt rightward wh-movement, the second wh-phrase is interpreted in situ through Unselective Binding.

Part 1. Wh-phrases in HKSL undergo overt rightward wh-movement.

Rightward movement is attested (single wh-questions)

(8) LAURA WRITE LETTER LONG-TIME.
'Laura wrote a letter for a long time.'

(9) a. LAURA WRITE LONG-TIME **WHAT**?
'What did Laura write for a long time?' (object wh-question)
b. *LAURA WRITE **WHAT** LONG-TIME?
c. ***WHAT** LAURA WRITE LONG-TIME?

(10) a. WRITE LETTER LONG-TIME **WHO**?
'Who wrote the letter for a long time?' (subject wh-question)
b. **WHO** WRITE LETTER LONG-TIME?

Rightward movement is attested (multiple wh-questions)

(11) AARON BUY COMPUTER SHORT-TIME.
'Aaron bought a computer in a short time.'

(12) a. ?**STUDENT WHO** BUY SHORT-TIME **COMPUTER WHICH**? (multiple wh-question)
'Which student bought which computer in a short time?'

b. ***STUDENT WHO** BUY **COMPUTER WHICH** SHORT-TIME?

Rightward movement is not focus driven (contra. ASL).

Background: For American Sign Language (ASL), Wood (2009) adopts the leftward wh-movement account (Petronio and Lillo-Martin, 1997; Petronio, 1993) and argues that the right-moved wh-phrase undergoes focus movement.

- This account parallels ASL with multiple wh-fronting (MWF) languages like Serbo-Croatian. A **contrastive non-wh focus** and a **wh-phrase** appear at the same position (Stjepanović, 1999; Bošković, 2002) (See Appendix).
- However, in HKSL, a **non-wh focus** (13) appears in a different position from clause-final **wh-phrases** (14).

(13) a. A: AARON BOOK CL_{read} LONG-TIME.
'Aaron read the book for a long time.'

b. B: NO, AARON **NEWSPAPER$_F$** CL_{read} LONG-TIME. (contrastive focus)
'No, Aaron read the NEWSPAPER$_F$ for a long time.'

(14) a. A: AARON CL_{read} LONG-TIME **WHAT**? (object wh-phrase)
'What did Aaron read for a long time?'

b. A: *AARON CL_{read} **WHAT** LONG-TIME?

c. A: *AARON **WHAT** CL_{read} LONG-TIME?

Section summary

- Wh-phrase undergoes rightward movement.
- The movement is not focus driven. Therefore, it moves to Spec-CP (to the right) (Neidle et al., 1996; Neidle et al., 1998).

- Wh-nonmanual (Wh-NMM) is not always present. The rightward wh-movement is not driven by marking wh-dependency by wh-NMM (contra. Cecchetto, Geraci, and Zucchi (2009)) for Italian Sign Language (LIS) (see Appendix).

Part 2. Subject WHO is special. It can be interpreted in situ.

Evidence from long-distance wh-questions

In a long-distance wh-question, the subject WHO extracted from the embedded clause cannot appear in a clause-initial position (16 a). Instead, it appears in situ (16 b) as its non-interrogative counterpart (15), or moves to the right (16 c).

(15) AARON THINK [$_{CP}$ BRENDA EAT FISH NOT].
'Aaron thought that Brenda does not eat fish.'

(16) a. *__WHO__ AARON THINK [$_{CP}$ *t* EAT FISH NOT?] (*left-moved)
'Who did Aaron think that does not eat fish?'

b. AARON THINK [$_{CP}$ __WHO__ EAT FISH NOT]? (in situ)

c. AARON THINK [$_{CP}$ *t* EAT FISH NOT] __WHO__? (right-moved)

Evidence from adverbials

Subject WHO also appears in situ as its non-interrogative counterparts. For instance:

(17) 'Luckily, Eva wasn't hurt.'

a. LUCKILY EVA HURT NOT-HAVE.
b. *EVA LUCKILY HURT NOT-HAVE.

(18) 'Luckily, who wasn't hurt?'

a. LUCKILY **WHO** HURT NOT-HAVE? (in situ)
b. ***WHO** LUCKILY HURT NOT-HAVE? (*left-moved)
c. LUCKILY HURT NOT-HAVE **WHO**? (right-moved)

Part 3. Multiple wh-questions in HKSL

In multiple wh-questions in HKSL...

One wh-phrase undergoes rightward wh-movement (19):

(19) a. ?**STUDENT WHO** BUY SHORT-TIME **COMPUTER WHICH**?
'Which student bought which computer in a short time?'
b. ***STUDENT WHO** BUY **COMPUTER WHICH** SHORT-TIME?

The other wh-phrase is interpreted in situ through Unselective Binding.

Evidence from adverbials

(20) a. SEE-CAN AARON GO SCHOOL.
'Obviously, Aaron went to school.'
b. *AARON SEE-CAN GO SCHOOL.

(21) *Context:* Kenny, Laura, and Brenda each got a gift card. They all used it to buy their favorite thing, which is obvious.

a. ?SEE-CAN **WHO** BUY **WHAT**? (WHO: in situ)
'Who obviously bought what?'
b. ***WHO** SEE-CAN BUY **WHAT**? (WHO: *left-moved)

Evidence from BOOK WHICH in double object construction

(22) a. BRENDA BOOK GIVE-3 AARON.
'Brenda gave Aaron a book.' [S-DO-V-IO]

b. ?BRENDA GIVE-3 AARON BOOK. ?[S-V-IO-DO]

c. *BRENDA GIVE-3 BOOK AARON. *[S-V-DO-IO]

(23) *Context:* Aaron is giving out three books, *HKSL Dictionary, Deafness*, and *Deaf Gain*, to three students, Eva, Jessica, and Sharon, as new year presents. There were some difficulties, but in the end, Aaron still managed to give out the books.

?AARON **BOOK BUOY-WHICH** GIVE STILL **WHO**?
bf

a. 'Whom did Aaron still give some of the books to?' (BOOK BUOY-WHICH: **quantifier NP**)

b. 'Whom did Aaron still give which of the books to?' (BOOK BUOY-WHICH: **wh-phrase**)

HKSL is a scope-rigid language (no QR at LF) (24). If BOOK WHICH interpreted as 'some of these book' occurs in its base position, then so should the alternative interrogative meaning.

(24) TEACHER ONE LIKE STUDENT ALL. (unambiguous)

a. (ONE > ALL) 'There is a teacher x such that x likes all students.'

b. #(ALL > ONE) 'For all student y, there is a teacher x such that x likes y.'

No LF-movement is involved, a natural conclusion seems to be that it is interpreted through Unselective Binding.

Discussions

Discussion 1: Account for the ban on multiple wh-question

My proposal: In HKSL, interrogative C can only have one Spec. So only one wh-phrase can be interpreted/licensed by undergoing wh-movement.

Why being D-linked can be exempted? Only D-linked wh-phrases can be unselectively bound, so they need not move in LF in multiple wh-questions (Pesetsky, 1987).

Differences between Italian and HKSL lies in the availability of Unselective Binding.

- In Italian, Unselective Binding is not available for interpreting wh-questions.
- Another issue could be a focus requirement on wh-phrases in Italian.
  - Wh-phrases in Italian must be focused (Calabrese, 1987; Calabrese, 1984), then they cannot be D-linked, thus cannot be unselectively bound.

Discussion 2: Special subject WHO

Not D-linked in nature.

(25) ‘Which student registered the course HKSL 1?’

a. *__STUDENT BUOY-WHICH__ REGISTER HKSL ONE?

b. REGISTER HKSL ONE __STUDENT BUOY-WHICH__?

Discussion 2: Special subject WHO (Attempt 1)

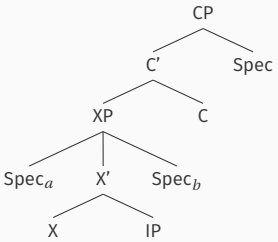
In addition to wh-movement, the [+wh] feature of interrogative C can also be checked through Agree.

- Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC)[4] requires Agree can only happen when the wh-phrase is close to Spec TP (subject wh-phrases only).
- Only WHO is eligible to agree with the [+wh] feature of an interrogative C
  - Only WHO carries [+ person] feature, which forms a complete ϕ-feature set that is required when checking the [+wh] feature of an interrogative C.

[4] PIC: Only the head and Specifier of a phase are accessible outside of phase (Chomsky, 2000; Chomsky, 2001; Bošković and Lasnik, 2006, a.o.)

Discussion 2: Special subject WHO (Attempt 2)

Bošković (2021) argues that wh-phrases move to a position lower than non-subject wh-phrases (Spec CP), but they are still higher than regular subjects (Spec-AgrsP).



- Assuming a moved wh-subject in HKSL lands in a lower position than Spec CP, referred to as Spec XP.
  - Either Spec-XP is bi-directional.
  - When located sentence-finally, WHO must be moved rightward to Spec-CP.
- Only WHO is a real subject wh-phrase that can occupy Spec XP.
  - Only WHO carries [+ person] feature, which makes it qualify as the syntactic subject.

Conclusion

In this study, I show that in argument wh-questions in HKSL:

- Wh-phrases undergo rightward wh-movement.
- Subject WHO is special, it can be interpreted in situ.
- In multiple wh-questions, one wh-phrase undergoes rightward wh-movement, the other one is interpreted in situ through Unselective Binding.

I suggest that the ban on multiple wh-questions is due to the uniqueness of Spec-CP for interrogative C. And D-linked wh-phrases can get around this restriction if Unselective Binding is available in the language for interpreting wh-questions.

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Thanks for your attention!

Details of Wood (2009)

Background: For ASL, Wood (2009) adopts the leftward wh-movement account (Petronio and Lillo-Martin, 1997; Petronio, 1993) and argues that the right-moved wh-phrase undergoes focus movement.

ASL multiple wh-q	1st wh-phrase	2nd wh-phrase
Non-D-linked	overt/covert wh-movement (leftward)	focus movement (rightward)
D-linked	overt/covert wh-movement (leftward)	Unselective Binding (in situ)

This account parallels ASL with multiple wh-fronting (MWF) languages like Serbo-Croatian. A contrastive non-wh focus and a wh-phrase appear at the same position (Stjepanović, 1999; Bošković, 2002).

(26) [ASL] (Wood 2009, ex. 59)

a. WHO BUY YESTERDAY **WHAT** ? (Non-D-linked)
b. WHO BUY **WHICH COMPUTER** LAST-NIGHT? (D-linked)
c. *WHO BUY LAST-NIGHT **WHICH COMPUTER** ? (D-linked)

Rightward movement is not focus driven (contra. ASL).

In ASL, D-linked wh-phrase cannot undergo focus movement (*WHICH COMPUTER* in (27 b)), but D-linked wh-phrase in HKSL can.

(27) [ASL] (Wood 2009, ex. 59)
Context: John, Mary, and Sue each plan to buy a computer. They all looked at Sony, Mac, and HP computers.

a. WHO BUY **WHICH COMPUTER** LAST-NIGHT? (must be in-situ)
'Who bought which computer last night?'

b. *WHO BUY LAST-NIGHT **WHICH COMPUTER**? (* rightward focus movement)

(28) [HKSL] *Context*: Three students, Kenny, Laura, and Brenda each plan to buy a computer. They all considered Mac, HP, Sony, and ended up buying one, the brands they bought were all different.

a. * WHO BUY **WHAT** SHORT-TIME? (* in-situ)
'Who bought what quickly?'

b. ? WHO BUY SHORT-TIME **WHAT**? (right-moved)

Thus, the rightward movement in HKSL cannot be focus movement.

Comparing ASL and HKSL regarding multiple wh-questions

Single wh-questions in ASL: wh-phrases can appear clause-finally, in-situ, or clause-initially. Doubling is also possible. (Neidle et al., 1998; Neidle et al., 2000; Petronio and Lillo-Martin, 1997).

ASL (Wood, 2009):

- Non-D-linked: one wh-phrase undergoes (overt/covert) wh-movement, the other undergoes focus movement.
- D-linked: one wh-phrase undergoes (overt/covert) wh-movement, the other is interpreted in situ through Unselective Binding.

HKSL:

- Obligatorily D-linked: one wh-phrase undergoes overt wh-movement, the other is interpreted in situ through Unselective Binding.

Multiple wh-questions in ASL vs. MWF languages (1)

For ASL, Wood (2009) adopts the leftward wh-movement account (Petronio and Lillo-Martin, 1997; Petronio, 1993) and argues that the right-moved wh-phrase undergoes focus movement.

ASL multiple wh-q	1st wh-phrase	2nd wh-phrase
Non-D-linked	overt/covert wh-movement (leftward)	focus movement (rightward)
D-linked	overt/covert wh-movement (leftward)	Unselective Binding (in situ)

MWF lgs	1st wh-phrase	2nd wh-phrase
Non-D-linked	overt wh-movement (leftward)	focus movement (leftward)
D-linked	overt wh-movement (leftward)	Unselective Binding (in situ)

Multiple wh-questions in ASL vs. MWF languages (2)

(29) [ASL] (Wood 2009, ex. 59)

a. WHO BUY YESTERDAY **WHAT**? (Non-DL)

b. WHO BUY **WHICH COMPUTER** LAST-NIGHT? (DL)

c. *WHO BUY LAST-NIGHT **WHICH COMPUTER**? (DL)

(30) [Serbo-Croatian] (Bošković, 2002, ex. 13, 26)

a. **Ko kupuje šta?*
who buy what
'Who buys what?'
(Non-DL)

b. *Ko šta kupuje?*
who what buy
(Non-DL)

c. *Ko kupuje koju knigu?*
who buy which book?
'Who buys which book?'
(DL)

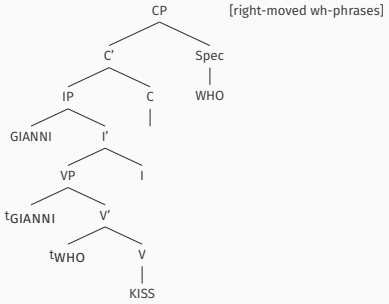
Wh-NMM marking wh-dependency (Cecchetto et al, 2009) (1)

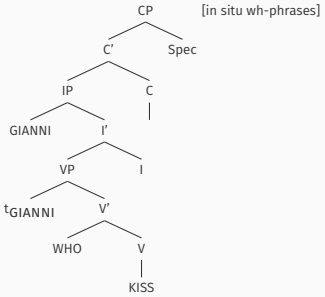
(31) [LIS] (Cecchetto, Geraci, and Zucchi (2009, Ex. 48))

a. GIANNI t_{WHO} KISS $\overline{\text{WHO}}^{\text{wh}}$
'Who did Gianni kiss?' (right-moved)

b. GIANNI t_{WHO} $\overline{\text{KISS WHO}}^{\text{wh}}$
'Who did Gianni kiss?' (right-moved)

c. GIANNI $\overline{\text{WHO KISS}}^{\text{wh}}$
'Which of them did Gianni kiss?' (in situ)

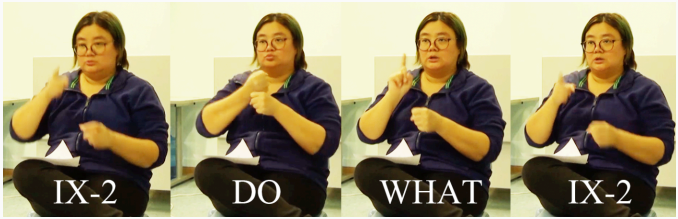




Wh-NMM marking wh-dependency (Cecchetto et al, 2009) (2)

In HKSL:

- 14 out of 167 questions do not have any grammatical wh-non-manuals (Gan, 2019).



- The spreading of wh-NMM in HKSL can be either over the wh-sign only, the whole wh-phrase, part of the sentence, or over the whole sentence. The proposal by Cecchetto, Geraci, and Zucchi (2009) is not able to capture all the spreading patterns, e.g., for sentences like (32). In addition, there are tokens in my data where the wh-NMM seems to be overridden by other affective or grammatical non-manuals.

(32) FEMALE$_a$ IX$_a$ HAT COLOR $\overset{\text{bf}}{\overline{\text{WHAT}}}$?
'What is the color of the woman's hat?'

More on Unselective Binding 1: Comparison with French

Wh-in-situ in French is interpreted through LF C-insertion (Bošković, 2000) (followed by LF wh-movement). However, in indirect wh-questions, wh-phrases must move (33). This is because LF C-insertion is blocked (C has to be introduced to the structure (i.e., in the overt syntax) before the higher structure is built. And since the overt C-insertion triggers immediate wh-movement, the wh-phrase has to undergo overt wh-movement.)

In HKSL multiple wh-questions and indirect wh-questions, subject WHO can either appear in situ or move to the right periphery (34). In other words, (34) cannot involve LF C-insertion.

(33) [French] (Bošković, 2000, p.59)

a. *Qui que tu as vu?*
whom C you have seen
'Who did you see?'
(moved wh-phrase)

b. **Que tu as vu qui*
C you have seen whom
(in situ wh-phrase)

(34) a. KENNY ASK **WHO** LIKE AARON.
'Kenny asked who likes Aaron.'

b. KENNY ASK LIKE AARON **WHO**.

More on Unselective Binding 2: no Superiority effect

There is no Superiority effect between the two wh-phrases in (35), i.e., no LF movement involved.

(35) 'Whom did Aaron still give which of the books to?'

a. ?AARON $\overline{\textbf{BOOK BUOY-WHICH}\ \text{GIVE}\ t\ \text{STILL}\ \textbf{WHO}_t}^{\text{bf}}$?

b. ?AARON t $\overline{\text{GIVE}\ \textbf{WHO BOOK BUOY-WHICH}_t}^{\text{bf}}$?

Special subject WHO (Attempt 1)

My proposal: In addition to wh-movement, the [+wh] feature of interrogative C can also be checked through Agree.

- Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC)[5] requires Agree can only happen when the wh-phrase is close to Spec TP (subject wh-phrases only).
- Only WHO is eligible to agree with the [+wh] feature of an interrogative C
  - Only WHO carries [+ person] feature, which forms a complete ϕ-feature set that is required when checking the [+wh] feature of an interrogative C.

However, c.f. (36):

(36) AARON THINK **WHO** EAT FISH NOT?
'Who did Aaron think that does not eat fish?'
(**WHO** should be very far from the interrogative C and should have violated PIC under this account.)

[5] PIC: Only the head and Specifier of a phase are accessible outside of phase (Chomsky, 2000; Chomsky, 2001; Bošković and Lasnik, 2006, a.o.)

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